

ALVES, Miriam (Ed.) *Finally us: contemporary black Brazilian writers*. Translated by Carolyn Richardson Durham. Colorado Springs: Three Continents Press, 1995. 258 p.

For decades Afro-Brazilian studies in the United States was almost the exclusive domain of historians and anthropologists. In the past fifteen years, a growing number of North American and European scholars and educators have begun to appreciate and critically access contemporary Afro-Brazilian literary production. A growing number of Spanish and Portuguese departments are now offering courses focused specifically on Afro-Latin American literatures and cultures. There are, however, relatively few Afro-Brazilian texts available to audiences outside of Brazil, which makes *Finally us: contemporary black Brazilian women writers*, a bi-lingual anthology of poetry edited by Afro-Brazilian writer Miriam Alves and translated by Carolyn Richardson Durham, particularly welcome.

It is often noted that Afro-Brazilian women suffer triple discrimination based on race, gender, and socio-economic *status*. Literary representations of Afro-Brazilian women in the work of canonical Brazilian authors often endorse, rather than critique, race/gender/class inequalities by limiting black female characters to selfless, long suffering, but typically good-natured servants and wet nurses, or voluptuous and libidinous *mulas*.

The recent literary production of Afro-Brazilian women has contributed in specific ways to a more general critique of Brazilian racial ideology. In the introduction, Durham notes:

The authors of this anthology emerged during a veritable explosion of expression enhanced by the conjunction of a series of political and social circumstances. They come to us as a result of changes in Brazil's political climate, an increased feminist consciousness, the coalescence of the Afro-Brazilian literary community, and the realization that the experiences, goals, and aspirations of Black women somehow set them apart from other women and from Black men, making it necessary for them to have their own voices. (3)

We might add that the development of an independent Black political movement – the Movimento Negro Unificado – and the emergence of Afrocentric cultural organizations throughout the country also contributed to this new climate.

Miriam Alves provides a useful prologue to the anthology, in which she briefly outlines the history of Afro-Brazilian literature stressing that “(b)lacks writing isn’t a new thing in the panorama of national literature” (17). Yet it wasn’t until the late 1970s that something of a collective literary movement coalesced – primarily in São Paulo – and began producing a journal called *Cadernos Negros* which continues to date. During the 1980s, several important anthologies were produced, including *Axé: Antologia contemporânea de poesia brasileira* (1982), *Razão da chama: antologia de poetas negros* (1986), and a bi-lingual German volume, *Schwarze Poesie – Poesia Negra* (1988). *Finally us* features some of the stalwarts of this literary movement, like Esmeralda Ribeiro, Sonia Fátima da Conceição, and Miriam Alves, as well as some new voices.

The selection of poetry in *Finally us* is extremely diverse, both in terms of content and form. As might be expected, a good share of these poems denounce racial injustice, gender inequality, poverty, and violence in contemporary society. Esmeralda Ribeiro’s “Fato”, for example, echoes in very simple terms the popular denunciations heard often during the centennial year of abolition in 1988:

Aboliram

Escravidão

A

não

condição

Other poems, like Alzira Rufino's "Resgate", focus more specifically on the issue of racial identity and self-affirmation:

Sou negra ponto final
devolva-me a identidade
rasgue minha certidão
sou negra sem reticências
sem vírgulas e sem ausências
não quero mais meio-termo
sou negra balacobaco
sou negra noite cansaço
sou negra ponto final

By claiming an unambiguous Black identity, as opposed the *morena* or *mulata* most often celebrated in mainstream Brazilian culture, the poet aligns herself with a relatively new, and by no means dominant, paradigm of racial identification – a paradigm often associated with North American "bi-polar" conceptions of race.

Several poems focus primarily on the issues surrounding sexual inequalities such as the dystopian poem "Neste século de dor" by the indigenous writer, Eliana Potiguara:

Neste século já não teremos mais buetas
Porque ser mãe neste século de morte
É estar em febre pra sub-existir
É ser fêmea na dor
Espoliada na condição de mulher

Others refer more specifically to affective disillusion, such as Sonia Fátima da Conceição's brief and powerfully evocative "Visionária":

Te querer é
espreitar na janela
o cortejo
de
desejos mutilados

Yet quite a few poems from *Finally us* offer celebratory images of the body and sexuality, like Maria da Paixão's erotic poem "Por você negro":

A negrice de meus beijos
A negrice de meus afagos
Tenho protegido no teu peito negro
A negrice de meus beijos
são lampejos de tara,
carnal é.

In many of these poems, women of color emerge as subjects in control of sexual pleasure, rather than mere objects of male desire (i.e. the fiery mulata), or sentimentalized emblems of motherhood/nationality (i.e. the portly, generous *mãe preta*).

Perhaps the most interesting selections in this anthology are the metacritical reflections on the act of writing and its significance for Afro-Brazilian women. The poem-manifesto "Palavras" by Miriam Alves is a particularly insightful meditation on the shifting, paradoxical relationships between writing, consciousness, and social critique:

Palavras para um poema:
Procuro-as no sorriso de satisfação da mulher grávida e vou encontrá-las no seu temor do futuro.
Procuro-as no olhar infantil de uma criança nas ruas da cidade e vou encontrá-las na incerteza de seus pés descalços.
(...)
Procuro-as nas mulheres virgens, vou encontrá-las curradas na saída das gafieras.

Procuro-as nas mulheres curradas, vou encontrá-las virgens a esperar o príncipe encantado.
Palavras para um poema:
Procuro-as e às vezes as encontro escondendo-se de mim dentro do meu casaco.

Durham has crafted useful, if not always elegant or entirely accurate, translations of these poems. Her choices demonstrate intimacy with the writers and familiarity with the issues surrounding their poetry. At times, she hastens to explain too much, as when she translates "currada" from the selection above as "sexually exploited and abused" when either adjective would have sufficed. Other translations are too literal. In Alzira Rufino's poem, "Verídico", for example, she translates "negro" as "black man" when it clearly refers to black people in general. In the last line of this poem "Creole" is made to stand in for "crioulo", which effaces significant differences in the way these designations are used in Brazil and the U.S. Elsewhere, the contemporary slang expression "Que droga" is rendered "What a drug", when perhaps "drag" would have worked better.

Despite its shortcomings, *Finally us* is an important contribution to the dissemination of Afro-Brazilian women's literary voices in the United States. It would function well in any course on Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Latin American studies taught either in Portuguese or in English.

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